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# Show Me Agriculture

## TOM BASS-Missouri's Gentle Horse Trainer

A baby was born in a rough cabin near Ashland, Missouri in 1859. His mother was named Cornelia Gray. She was a pretty teen-age slave girl owned by the Bass family. The slave-owner's wife named the baby Thomas Bass. Cornelia was expected to work, so a nursemaid cared for Tom during the day and before long, his grandparents, Presley and Eliza Gray, were raising him.

From a very young age, Tom's grandparents observed how much Tom liked to be around animals. In fact, they feared that Tom might get hurt by being around the large horses and cattle on the Bass plantation. However, they soon found that it was easier to keep the large animals inside their pens than it was to keep little Tom out. By the time Tom was four, he was already climbing onto horses for a ride. Luckily, Tom had been born on the plantation of Eli Bass and the Basses were known to have many of the finest horses in Missouri.

Since Tom was so young, he did not understand that a big Civil War was happening in the United States. However, by the time Tom was six years old, the war ended. One day, the slaves on the Bass plantation were called in and Mr. Bass told them that they were free! Tom's grandparents and some of the other former slaves decided to stay on the Bass farm and became sharecroppers. Eli Bass soon died, but nothing changed very much because Eli's son, William Bass, took over the plantation. He was a good manager and he and the former slaves prospered.

In 1866, Tom got to go to his first horse show. He was just a boy but he was invited to go because he was so helpful around the horses. Tom remembered that horse show for the rest of his life. He was amazed to see the many horses prancing about the show ring. These horses were not just any horses; they were horses that lifted their hooves proudly as they performed various gaits (steps). The pride of the Bass farm was a mare known as Helen McGregor. Tom learned a lesson at that first horse show – one

he lived by for the rest of his life. William Bass was riding Helen McGregor, and they placed second in class. Tom became very angry that Helen had not placed first. William told Tom that some things in life, such as horse show placings, are not always fair but a gentleman does not complain about them.

Back on the farm, Tom's greatest thrill was getting to ride the famous Helen McGregor. However, just a few weeks later, tragedy struck. One morning, Tom and the other

workers noticed that Helen was not feeling well and within just a few hours, Helen had died of a disorder called colic. Tom could not have been sadder. His best friend was gone. It was months before he could even go back into the barn.

Tom's grandparents were worried about him and how sad he was. One day, his grandfather had an idea. Tom was given a new job. He was to exercise a mule named Mr. Potts. Mr. Potts was known to be one of the most stubborn animals on the farm. If

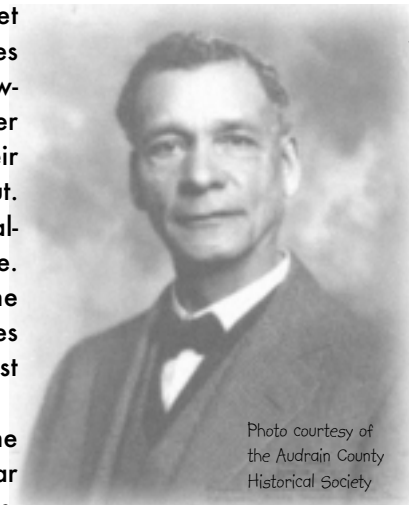


Photo courtesy of  
the Audrain County  
Historical Society

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(Tom Bass, continued)

Mr. Potts did not want to work or be ridden, he would just sit down. One day, Tom was riding Mr. Potts and that's just what the mule did – he sat down and refused to get up. Tom's grandfather was watching from the house. When Tom slid off Mr. Potts, even though he was angry, he did not hit or kick at the mule. Instead, Tom gently used a rope and patiently worked with the mule until the mule got up. Tom got back on the mule and before long, the mule was heading down the lane. From that day forward, Tom worked with Mr. Potts every day. He taught the mule all of the gaits that he had seen the fancy show horses perform. Tom knew what he wanted to do with his life – he dreamed of being a great horse trainer and riding in the horse shows. Tom also knew that he wanted to train his horses gently and with kindness.

William Bass was impressed with how Tom had trained the uncooperative Mr. Potts. He soon had Tom helping around the horse barn again. Even though Tom was not yet eleven years old, he proved that he could work with just about any horse. Soon, Mr. Bass was buying "outlaw" horses that no one seemed to be able to train. Tom's gentle ways of talking to each horse and his refusal to use a whip or anything that might hurt the horse amazed everyone. Tom was soon making more money than he had dreamed of. Mr. Bass bought the outlaw horses at low prices; Tom would train them; and Mr. Bass would then sell them for a higher price.

When Tom Bass was still a teenager, he moved from the Bass farm to the town of Mexico, Missouri. Before long, his reputation as an outstanding horse trainer was recognized. Tom had an eye for good horses and Tom was soon a horse buyer for the big horse sales at Mexico.

P-L-E-A-S-E Mr. Potts



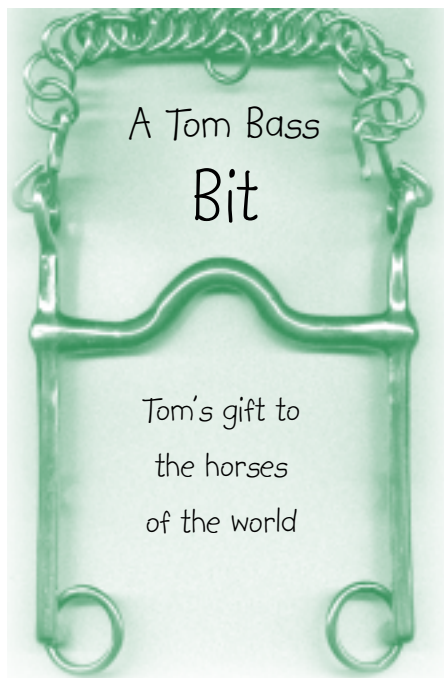
A few years later, Tom found a beautiful black mare that had a reputation for being untrainable. Most people were afraid to even go near her. However, Tom looked beyond her behavior and could see what a beautiful show horse she could be. Tom used his usual gentle manner and just a few weeks later, he amazed everyone by riding the mare. When he was questioned about how he managed to train an untrainable horse, he told about his new invention. Tom had invented a kind of bit (a metal rod held in the horse's mouth) that did not hurt the horse. Many bits used to train young horses in those days were sharp and painful. Sometimes this scared the horse badly. Tom's friends were impressed with the new bit that he had used on the black mare. They

encouraged Tom to patent the new bit so he could make money from it. Tom refused, saying that the gentle bit was his gift to the horses of the world. The bit is still used today and is called a "Tom Bass Bit."

The mare performed perfectly for Tom and the mare's owners decided to take her to a show. The problem was that everyone else was still afraid to ride her. So they asked Tom to be her rider. That seemed to be a natural choice, but it was a bold one because all other riders at horse shows were white. No one knew how the other riders would react to having a former slave in the show. This made Tom nervous,

but Tom's blazing black mare was so impressive that few people paid any attention to the color of his skin. Tom soon learned that there would sometimes be someone in the crowd who might make a rude remark about his race. Tom was a rather shy man but he quickly learned that the best way to handle such remarks was to do his best and win.

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(Tom Bass, continued)

Soon, Tom was showing the best horses not only in Missouri, but also in Kentucky.

Tom's success showing horses soon gave him other opportunities. One opportunity led him and his new wife, Angie, to move to Kansas City where he opened the Tom Bass Stables on Main Street. Within a year of opening his stable, Tom was selected to be on the Board of Advisors for the Kansas City Fire Department. It was important to have people who knew about horses working with the fire department because strong, fast horses had to pull the heavy fire equipment. Before long, the Fire Department needed a way to make money. Tom suggested that they have a horse show. So, in 1892, a horse show was held in a tent in Kansas City. This horse show became the **American Royal** – one of the biggest horse shows in the United States.

While in Kansas City, Tom found the horse of his dreams. Her name was Miss Rex and she became one of the finest saddle horses in the world. In 1893, Tom and Miss Rex went to the big World's Fair in Chicago. There Miss Rex won the prize as World



Champion. Also, Tom was impressed with the number of people who were using Bass bits with their horses.

Tom eventually moved his horses and stable back to Mexico. He became more and more famous. Important people such as President Theodore Roosevelt and Buffalo Bill Cody were among the visitors who came to meet Tom. In fact, five presidents of the United States came to see Tom. Tom had another honor when Queen Victoria invited Tom to bring one of his best horses to England to perform. Tom was afraid of traveling by ship, so he did not go.

In 1902, Tom was performing with one of his best horses—Columbus. Columbus was trained to rear up on his hind legs but one day, Columbus reared up too high and fell over backwards. The horse landed on Tom, crushing him. Many thought Tom had been killed. Tom, in fact, had been badly injured and it was assumed that if he recovered, he would never ride again.

Within two years, Tom had recovered enough that he was again able to ride and compete in horse shows. He won several ribbons at the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair including the blue ribbon for first prize mare.<sup>1</sup>

Tom had many horses during his lifetime and seemed to love each one. One that was most special to him was Belle Beach. Tom showed her for many years with great success all over the United States. When Belle died in 1932, Tom was heartbroken. However, he continued to keep a few horses until his death in 1934. During his lifetime, presidents and many other famous people had come to visit Missouri's gentle horse trainer. Tom was not wealthy when he died, but he had gained the respect of people all over the world.



Tom Bass and Miss Rex

1. Photo courtesy of the Mo. Historical Society Library, St. Louis



## INTERVIEWING

### a Missouri Historical Figure

In the story about Tom Bass, you learned that Tom was the first African American to exhibit horses at important horse shows. The Civil War had been over for many years, but former slaves found that being free did not necessarily mean "equal." In the late 1800's and well into the 1900's there was still a lot of prejudice towards former slaves and people of different races.

As we celebrate Black History Month, your assignment is to combine the knowledge that you have gained about Tom Bass with knowledge you have about the time period when Tom was a young man. Work cooperatively in a small group. Think up some interview questions that someone

might have asked Tom Bass about his first big horse show when he rode the "untrainable" black mare. Then decide how Tom might have answered the questions and how you think he might have behaved or felt. (Your teacher might want to review with your class about this time period in history before you start the assignment.)

Within each group, choose one person to ask questions and another person to play the part of Tom Bass. Practice the interview and decide which answers best reflect how you think Tom would have responded. After everyone has had time to practice, each set of partners will perform the interview with the whole class as the audience.

## Make a TIMELINE

After you have read the story about Tom Bass, answer the following questions to help you create a TIMELINE of the important dates in Tom Bass's life.

- Tom Bass was born in \_\_\_\_\_.
- Tom became free at the end of the Civil War in \_\_\_\_.
- Tom attended his first horse show in \_\_\_\_.
- The horse show that became the American Royal began in \_\_\_\_.
- Tom showed the Chicago World's Fair champion in \_\_\_\_.
- Tom was injured by a falling horse in \_\_\_\_.
- Tom showed a St. Louis World's Fair winner in \_\_\_\_.
- Belle Beach died in \_\_\_\_.
- Tom Bass died in \_\_\_\_.

Write the date and event on the top of the first "I". Place the next date and event on the bottom of the "I". Then alternate from top to bottom to allow more space to write. The first two dates are completed for you.

